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SUBJECT: BELARUS: SERIOUS DISCORD WITHIN UNITED DEMOCRATIC FORCES

REF: A) MINSK 132, B) VILNIUS 228, C) MINSK 133

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Summary

11. (SBU) The leader of a major opposition party has ignited controversy through an April 17 interview with Belarus' state-owned newspaper. In the interview, Belarusian Social-Democratic Party Gramada (BSDP-G) chair Levkovich generously complimented President Lukashenka and condemned fellow democratic politicians for their overly critical stance of the current regime. In response, United Democratic Forces (UDF) co-chairs temporarily banned Levkovich from making any statements on behalf of the group. Observers note that the regime has been singling out what it calls "constructive" or "sensible" pro-democratic activists to weaken and split them from their colleagues, thereby proving the weakness and lack of relevance of the democratic opposition. End summary.

UDF Leader Calls for Cooperation with Regime

12. (U) The Presidential Administration-controlled daily newspaper Sovetskaya Belarus/Belarus Segodnya published a widely read interview April 17 with Chairperson of the Belarusian Social-Democratic Party Gramada (BSDP-G) Anatoliy Levkovich. Its publication has raised heated debates in opposition circles and divided the United Democratic Forces (UDF). In the extensive interview, Levkovich stated that the democrats failed to hold a "revolution" because "other groups" fostered changes in 1994 (when Lukashenka was first elected). Saying that the "opposition should cooperate with the political system and not throw sand in its wheels," he described opposition tactics as contraproductive and aimed only at thwarting an established "model of social development elaborated by Lukashenka and his peers". Furthermore, Levkovich criticized "defiant opposition" to Lukashenka who, as he claims, "was elected and is being supported by the majority of the nation" and complained bitterly that "the democrats were thus fighting their own people". Levkovich also suggested that his party would be "persistently looking for points of contact with the political leadership" to jointly pursue a path for the BSDP-G "to become a full-fledged member of the systematic political process". He stressed that Lukashenka was "a spontaneous social democrat" and that the BSDP-G would be "cooperating with the authorities and supporting their pragmatic policies". Levkovich concluded that stability-oriented political forces had always enjoyed more popularity in Belarus than the groups that "undermine" the political situation.

"An Egregious Political Mistake"

13. (U) UDF Co-Chairs slammed Levkovich for voicing dissenting political statements. At their April 22 meeting, the UDF

unanimously voted to temporarily restrict Levkovich's authority to act and speak on behalf of the UDF. Belarusian Popular Front Deputy Chairperson Vintsuk Vyachorka called the interview "an egregious political mistake" and vehemently criticized Levkovich over his condemnation of the democratic movement for opposing to the current regime. United Civic Party Chairperson Anatol Lyabedzka echoed Vyachorka's remarks, stating that Levkovich "had neither moral nor political rights" to represent the UDF or to make "unacceptable" statements that run counter to the previously endorsed official policies the UDF adopted jointly. For Freedom Movement deputy head Viktor Karniyenka pointed to Levkovich's "inconsistency" and expressed serious concerns over his "readiness to praise the regime on any favorable occasion". Other prominent political leaders denounced the interview as "outrageous" and demonstrating blatant political "loyalty" to Lukashenka.

All About Getting the Word Out

14. (U) Levkovich flatly dismissed all accusations against him, saying that he never contested UDF's major principles and only referred to "the sovereignty and independence of Belarus and democratization of society". He opined that the democrats were free to "express personal opinions" and argued that he the broad circulation of Belarus Segodnya [500,000 copies] helped to expand his audience better than publication of the same remarks in an independent paper such as Narodnaya Volya [circulation 20,500 copies]. Levkovich's Deputy Igor Maslovskiy told us that he did not expect the BSDP-G "to take any radical measures" with regard to Levkovich's standing as chair; however, he noted that their critical observations "were conveyed" directly to Levkovich. BSDP-G Secretary General Mecheslav Grib urged the UDF "to take the matters calmly and reasonably". Former BSDP-G chair Alyaksandr Kazulin, turfed out of the party leadership by Levkovich just before Kazulin's release as a political prisoner in August 2008, has not commented to date publicly but can be expected to be highly critical of Levkovich's approach.

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Comment

15. (SBU) The interview with Levkovich was the first with any UDF leader to appear in Belarus Segodnya, although we have seen for some time that the GOB has wanted to highlight any difference of opinion that would undermine the unity of the democratic opposition: Lukashenka's praise of Milinkevich in his annual address (ref A) is a further example. Levkovich had played a useful role as the coordinator of the UDF's joint candidate list for the September 2008 parliamentary elections, but his machinations against Kazulin lost him a lot of credibility and support. Separately, although as yet unregistered by the GOB, the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party (BCDP) is rumored to be finding a way to work more closely with the regime on that theory that "sovereignty is more important than democracy": comments made by BCDP co-chair Vital Rymasheuski to a visiting CODEL in Vilnius (ref B) suggest that party is thinking about other accommodations as well. The commitment of most democratic activists to Euro-Atlantic values remains strong; they also cannot be faulted for their lack of access to the Belarusian people. However, combined with very recent evidence that the democratic forces are failing to coordinate even the most basic, popular public events (ref C), there is growing concern about their continued viability and every reason to suspect that the key democratic parties will not succeed in nominating a unified candidate to oppose Lukashenka in the presidential elections expected in 2010 or 2011. The appearance of multiple candidates will all but assure Lukashenka of getting re-elected even if voting procedures are markedly improved.

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